Nat Pyper (NP)

Nat Pyper is an artist and designer that seamlessly moves between graphic work, textiles, writing, and performance, using each media as a form of investigation into the alphabet. In their project, *A Queer Year of Love Letters*, Pyper unearths typefaces from seminal moments in queer history and recreates them as a usable font disseminated for free. Their body of work reframes fonts as a means to archive and disseminate essential voices from queer history. The collection of typefaces demonstrates how a bootleg ideology might infiltrate practices such as type design, smuggling histories, and ideologies into new and unexpected territories. Interview by Ben Schwartz (BS).

> BS: So often, the motivation behind a bootleg is love. It's this idea of love that makes me think of your *Queer Year of Love Letters* project. If there is a font revival project that could be considered a bootleg, it's this one. How did love or homage affect the way you dealt with or treated this material?

NP: There are certain literal aspects where the title is a play on words: fonts as "love letters," but also

the actual alphabets as "love" "letters." Digging deeper, I see the project as a way to establish a lineage or an inheritance outside of the patriarchal relations of passing down. I was interested in ways to establish a bond with people outside of space and time. The reason I wanted to turn these letters into a font and not something static like a poster or an essay is to highlight the work that these queers were doing, and at the same time put that work to new use. It's a way of establishing that this work is not yet done, it continues, and these fonts are maybe a poetic way of repurposing these forms. It's important that it gets used freely, and in that way the ideas behind them continue to evolve and change.

> BS: For me, these fonts exemplify this idea of a bootleg as a form of alternate archiving. It's a form of preservation, but one that is much more active and participatory, and far less precious than a traditional archive. It allows for a certain amount of power, but also a risk in losing control of the material or ideas.

NP: When I started the project, it was a way to pair my interests in type design with this particular history that I was beginning to create my own relationship to. I put these fonts out there because I wanted people to use them and I didn't necessarily consider the full spectrum of how that might happen or what it might mean. I realized part of letting go is related to the radical nature of this history. So many of the people that I'm highlighting with these fonts were anti-fascist, they were against a certain tyranny of culture and were interested in hijacking that culture through their

own work. I totally understand that people are going to put these fonts to all kinds of uses, but I'm more interested in the ideas that propagate, regardless of where or how the font gets used. In fact, the font-object (font file) itself literally always retains this historical information. The OTF contains details about this radical history associated with the typeface, so as it moves it gets deposited in various places often unbeknownst to the user. I really like the idea that even if the history isn't reproduced in the use of the font, it forever remains true to its original intent.

> BS: I love that. It's a way of smuggling and disseminating history which feels very much aligned with the origins of bootlegging. You mentioned how these fonts came out of a particular research, and I'm curious about this idea of bootlegging as a form of research. How might a bootleg allow us to achieve a certain proximity or intimacy with a subject? How has your relationship or understanding of this history changed through the process of recreating these letters?

NP: In the case of the G.B. Jones font, I was able to gain a certain amount of proximity in that I was actually able to speak with her. She's a filmmaker in Toronto, and I shared with her the idea of the font and my interest in it being a more recent history. With this typeface, the particular history it represents deals with people who are still alive, and it's something I'm constantly thinking about, how to achieve certain proximity to history, especially to a past that is not yet that far gone. One that is in many ways still developing. And I should say that I don't

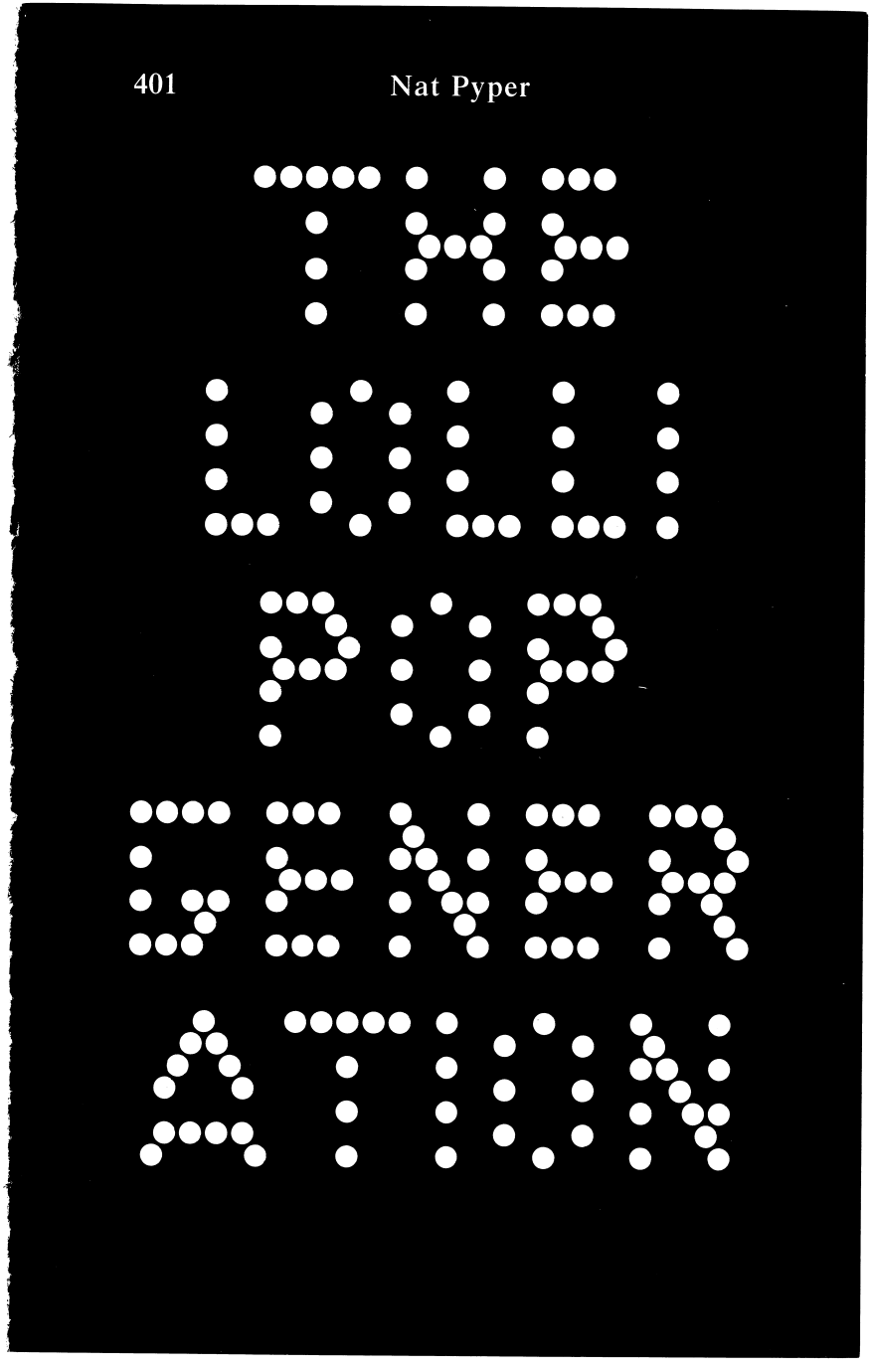
see these fonts as a proxy for the voice of these people; I'm not trying to speak on their behalf. I'm more interested in working with these forms and putting them to new use.

I also want to be sensitive to the fact that this history can't be reproduced. Especially the queer punk work, is really resistant to definition, legibility, and categorization. That's why queer punks adopted queer as a label, because it resisted any easy definition. They rejected terms like gay and lesbian, and embraced terms like "fags" and "dykes" and "queers." They were interested in reclaiming these labels, and not as apt descriptors, but rather more like cover for the activities that they wanted to participate in. So when working with these histories, that's the trick that I'm trying to understand—how do you relate or point to a history that resists historicism?

> BS: I've come to understand bootlegging as a valuable tool to preserve and pass on overlooked and underrepresented histories. Do you think bootlegging could be used as a tool for activism and resistance in these communities?

NP: I think you could talk about what queer punk scenesters were doing as a form of bootlegging, but I think importantly, even if you *do* describe what they're doing as bootlegging, the end result I wouldn't describe as such. The breakdown happens because the work is recontextualized, recombined, and changed in such a significant way that it protects them from copyright infringement. The work is altered enough

p. 401: Nat Pyper, G.B. Jones (2018)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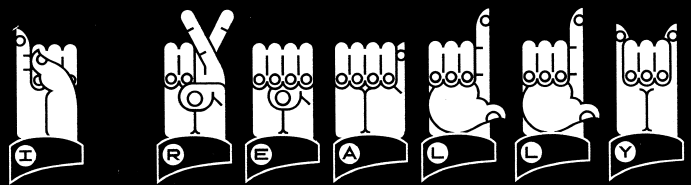
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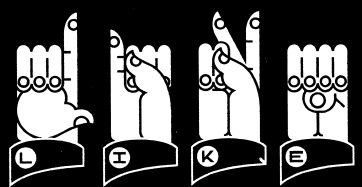
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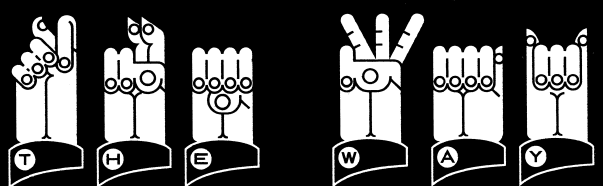
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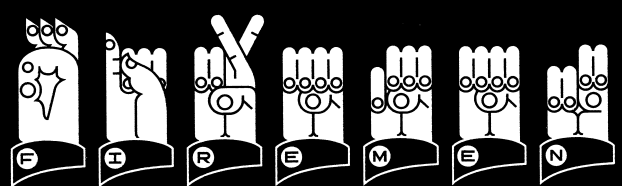
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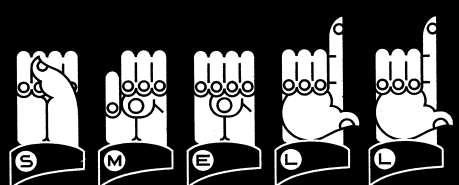
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that it's not trying to be the original work, it's using the original to do something new. These punks were adamantly into copyleft regulation so I don't think they would've seen it as a bootleg, they were more interested in the free exchange of ideas.

So if you define bootleg as I originally thought—something reproduced against the law—then I think a lot of these queer anarchists wanted the law abolished in the first place. So a bootleg couldn't exist because the ideas are just so rapidly circulating among themselves. I'm interested in a world where a bootleg can't exist or it goes by another name because there is no law to protect the original thing in the first place.

> BS: But you mentioned earlier how these punks reappropriated the language of oppression as a way of reclaiming it and using it against the original purpose—a form of détournement like the logo flips of the early aughts. If you think of a bootleg in this way, then perhaps it does seem like it could possibly become a resistance tactic?

NP: Yeah there was something kind of meta happening with queer punk zines in the mid- to late-1980s and early 1990s, in that punk zines had already existed for the better part of a decade. Of course, different zines had existed before then too, and specifically, the format of cut and paste as a methodology had existed for a long time. I think where queer zines diverge in an interesting way is that there's this meta level of, they were cutting and pasting from this punk

p. 402: Nat Pyper, Martin Wong (2018)

culture that existed. So all of these values of capitalism and of the state were in fact reproducing themselves without them realizing it. And so, you know, these queer punks were going one step further.

They are using cut and paste as a method for cultural critique, but are also critiquing their punk predecessors, the ones who had passed down this method. And then of course in general with punk there's a lot of interesting staking out and a lot of infighting. And so with the queer zines, there's such a complex ecosystem happening where they're also critiquing each other and using each other's words against them.

I agree with the simple idea that they were repurposing the culture that was around them in order to critique it and gain power and have a voice. A lot of these people were isolated; some of my favorite scenes are from Milwaukee, not just because I lived there, but also because it's such a good example of this isolated queer who has no one around them. There's this really great story in one Milwaukee zine, with this punk who goes to a punk bar and sees this other punk that has a bandana in his pocket. And he thinks, "Oh my God, it's another fag punk, I didn't know these people existed here." He starts talking with them and by the end he realizes that it's just a straight punk that reappropriated gay culture for a look. He really realizes how alone he is, and he's saying all this in a diatribe in his zine that's then going out into the world, and he's connecting with other queer zinesters, going to zine conventions in Toronto, Chicago, New York, et cetera. Ultimately, it's a method for critique, but also to bridge the divides that had existed before then.

p. 405: Nat Pyper, Robert Ford (2018)

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BS: I am reminded here of your piece on stunt doubling, where you are tasking punks to go further. I feel the same way about bootlegging...

NP: Yeah, the reason I used that analogy was because I was trying to find something that could speak to their embodied experience and this action that is commonly understood as risk-taking. I think that those are important elements of what it means to engage in that kind of activity. There needs to be real risk involved because the payoff is that much more incredible. In the case of queer punks, it's liberation, the possibility of pushing against the culture until it explodes into something more.

BS: I know community is a central tenet of your practice. I see it to be an important element of bootlegging as well. Looking at *Queer Year of Love Letters*, can you talk about what effect these fonts have on creating or preserving communities?

NP: I think that is the root of all of my work—an interest in publishing and in literacy, and how with these acts we can transgress the divides between us. This idea of community becomes really interesting when it's people that are actively interested in this transgression, while also recognizing and valuing these separations. With the fonts, for example, I'm resharing these into the world because I want to find community around these ideas and these histories in the same way that queer punks were publishing and bridging the divides of space and time that were between them. I'm really interested in this idea of es-

tablishing community across space and time—people who no longer exist, people who are yet to exist, and with the fonts the potential of supporting writing and ideas that don't yet exist.

Title page (p. 396): "S" from Nat Pyper's Martin Wong font (2018) from *Queer Year of Love Letters*